

## Tools for Planning

Nonprofits can draw from a broad array of tools to help them connect the qualitative aspirations of their mission and goals to the measurable actions that will lead them there. We've illustrated previous Critical Issues with some of these tools, but this time we'll look at a broader spectrum of them and frame them in a larger context.

### Context

Meaningful strategic planning requires tools, skills, experience, judgment and authority:

- The responsibility for planning lies with the board. The board can delegate its **authority** for planning, but unless it is fully committed to overseeing both the planning and implementation processes, it is unlikely that a strategic plan can be successful.
- While strategic planning is not rocket science, it's also not so simple that you can read the instructions and do it right the first time. You need the **judgment** to design a process that will work for a specific organization, giving consideration to organizational structure, culture, needs, situation and resources. You need the **experience** to be able to guide the organization through its best strategic thinking to develop a plan that is ambitious, achievable, measurable and renewable. And you need the **skills** to manage the process efficiently, draw on the wisdom of all stakeholders, inspire enthusiasm, and develop leadership capacity.

Some rare organizations have all of these resources in-house; others need some assistance in designing or fine-tuning a process even if they can manage it themselves. The cost of not getting every possible advantage out of the planning process (see Critical Issues #1, Why Plan?)—or worse (but not uncommon), having the process lose momentum and end up disappointing everyone—is too great to risk. If you can do most of the planning work yourself, your organization may well strengthen its strategic focus and develop its leadership more effectively than by any other activity. But some limited advisory services from a consultant with the requisite judgment, experience and skills will usually make an enormous difference in the success of the enterprise.

- Within this context, there are many different kinds of planning **tools** available, from the overall approach or **framework**, to **component processes** used to address specific sets of issues, to **individual instruments** for specific purposes. When any one of these categories is disregarded, the integrity and value of the planning process will likely be compromised.

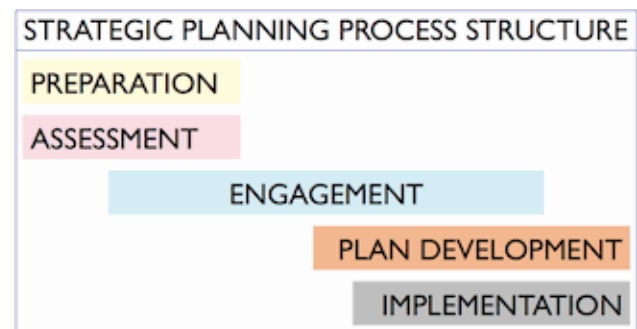
## Frameworks

A planning process needs an overall framework within which it can unfold.

Planning frameworks developed in or for the business world or the military can sometimes work for nonprofits as well. These include the Balanced Scorecard, logic models, scenario planning, strategy mapping, strategy screens, and 'theory of change.' And there are shortcut frameworks such as the one-day, one-page and six-hour strategic plan. Any of these approaches can produce useful results in the right set of circumstances.

But often an approach that seems seductive at first glance will be too complex for the organization, too simplistic for its real needs, or just a bad fit. The trick is to understand your needs and the characteristics of various approaches well enough to select and use them properly.

Many of these approaches are best used as subsidiary component processes (which, to be fair, is more what some of them claim to be) within a larger planning framework, such as the flexible approach described in CI #5, The Structure of Planning (see Figure 1: Planning Process).



**Figure 1: Planning Process**

This approach can be shaped to meet the specifics of any situation. At the extremes, we have used it for an emergency plan developed during a two-day retreat and for a complex reorganization that took a year and a half. As a structure that can be filled out with the pertinent tools such as those described below, it is far more likely to lead to success than would a pre-packaged approach chosen because it has worked spectacularly well for another organization with different characteristics.

**Component processes**

The ultimate purpose of a strategic plan is to enable an organization to fulfill its mission and realize its vision (see CI #7: On Mission) by connecting available resources and the activities of the organization through a chain of causation to mission (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Connecting Actions to Mission**

In our strategic plan framework (Figure 3), activities have measurable outputs. These activities and outputs are developed to fulfill the requirements of successive layers of outcomes. A set of activities together will achieve an objective; a set of objectives will achieve a goal; and the full set of goals will lead to realizing the mission (see CI #15: Strategic Action).

It is important to keep in mind that strategic planning in a nonprofit should do much more than produce a written plan. The process itself can cultivate engagement, shape consensus, and develop leadership (see the individual instruments below under *engagement* and *assessment*).

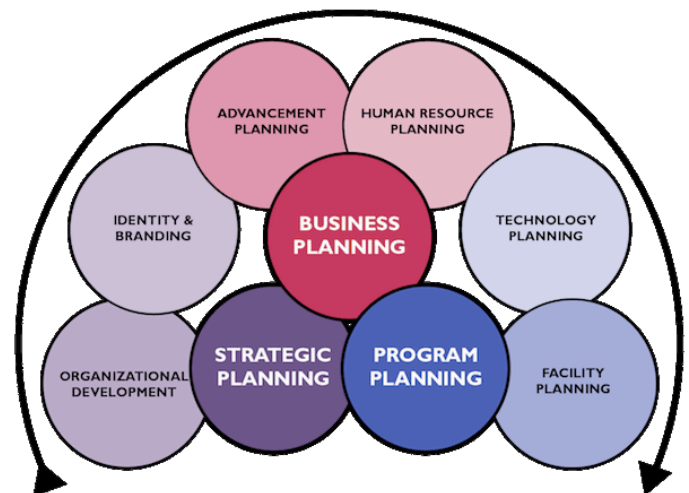
The breadth of these process benefits distinguishes our conception of the strategic planning process from the focus of the other planning frameworks mentioned above. Logic models, scenario planning, strategy mapping, strategy screens, and ‘theory of change’ are just different ways of thinking about the connection of activities to mission. They focus primarily on program planning (the purview of the professional staff), with a dash of business planning (the purview of senior staff and board), but not so much on stakeholder engagement, which is the critical feature of nonprofit strategic planning (see CI #1, Why Plan?).



**Figure 3: Strategic Plan Structure**

As part of a comprehensive approach to integrated planning (Figure 4: Integrated Planning), these process systems can, in the right situations, be very helpful in working through the program-related aspects of the assessment, plan development and implementation phases of strategic planning, but they do not really address the essential organizational development aspects of the process, at the beginning (preparation) middle (engagement) and end (implementation).

In our review of individual instruments we’ll focus largely on those that relate to the critical role of stakeholder participation.



**Figure 4: Integrated Planning**

**Individual instruments**

In *Critical Issues*, webinars, and blog posts I have shared tools for every stage in the planning process:

**Preparation:**

- **Timelines:** It is tempting to put the planning process on hold to address an ostensibly urgent issue, or until some important decision can be made, or just to find convenient times to fit the next piece of it into a senior staff or board agenda. Once momentum is lost, quite often the planning process just seeps away. If a clear, achievable timeline can be set at the beginning and followed, planning is far more likely to succeed. For an example of a timeline see the archived webinar, *Strategic Planning Part 1: Cultivation and Organizational Development*
- **The division of roles and responsibilities:** Even if you hire a consultant to guide the planning process, you'll need a planning committee chair and a champion on the governing board. For an example of a breakdown of responsibilities see the archived webinar, *Strategic Planning Part 1*

**Assessment:**

- **Benchmark and trend identification and analysis:** Identifying and considering external data as a context for organizational decisions can be important to business, program and strategic planning. There are many uses, in operations and in fundraising, for documentation of strengths and weaknesses (CI #8: *The Measure of Success* and the webinar *Strategic Planning Part 3: Measure, Monitor, Report*)
- **Mission statement review:** Shared clarity on mission is the starting point for all strategy. The mission statement should be reviewed and confirmed during the planning process (see CI #7, *On Mission*, the webinar *What's a Mission Statement Worth?*, various blog posts)
- **Board self-assessment:** Self assessment puts the board in a reflective frame of mind conducive to thoughtful inquiry. It offers an opportunity to consider organizational strengths and weaknesses in the context of inclusive mutual responsibility. This helps to get trustees thinking first in terms of their fiduciary role and personal commitment rather starting with an externalized sense of what others (the chief executive or staff) need to do. (see CI #5: *The Structure of Planning* & the webinar, *Strategic Planning Part 1*)
- **Governance tools:** Beyond the board self assessment, the strategic planning process often provides an

opportunity to examine governance policies and procedures and to put more effective ones into place (see CI #4: *On Boards*, the webinar *Nonprofit Boards & Effective Governance*, and various blog posts)

**Engagement:**

- **Variations on retreat tools**
  - **SWOT analysis:** The analysis of Strengths Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats is a stock tool in nonprofit strategic planning. Our tweaks can make it far more satisfying and productive. (see the blog post *SWOT*: <http://bit.ly/SyPswot>)
- **Polarity exercises:** A dynamic tension between opposing perceptions is fundamental to a healthy organization. Those whose focus is financial sustainability or the importance of strengthening management resources may be unable to communicate effectively with those who see only the urgent need to apply all possible resources to programs and services. Those who see an urgent need to maintain or enhance facilities may be frustrated trying to discuss the budget with those for whom insufficient staff salaries and benefits, or financial aid, are the critical priorities. Some differences can't—and shouldn't—be resolved, they can only be managed. In these situations, an exercise that allows all parties to see the virtues and drawbacks of their position along with the benefits of the opposing position can set up a much more productive discussion of issues. (see the blog post *Good Tension*: <http://bit.ly/SyPtension>)
- **Stakeholder surveys and other communications:** In most organizations there are large groups of stakeholders with whom there is little direct contact—members, users, subscribers, patrons, guests, alumni, parents.... The interest, support and enthusiasm of these constituencies can be vital to the sustained vitality, or even viability, of the organization, and a strategic planning process is an ideal time to ramp up the communications effort. (CI #2: *The Secret Life of Surveys*, and the webinar *Strategic Planning Part 1*)

**Plan development**

(see CI #5, CI # 8, CI #15, the webinar *Strategic Planning Part 2*):

- **Measurable actions:** If a plan does not feature measurable actions, to shape and evaluate individual performance, it will be a pretty picture, not a roadmap. The actions must be relevant, ambitious and achievable.
- **Meaningful outcomes:** There are many ways to develop a hierarchy of outcomes leading from measurable actions to mission. Sometimes a rigorous structure (see the next

tool) is sufficient. In other situations, the logic model or theory of change approaches, or others mentioned above can facilitate the required thinking.

- An effective structure for goals, objectives and measurable actions: The backbone of a meaningful strategic plan is a structure that rigorously connects measurable actions to the achievement of mission. This structure encompasses a chain of goals that are necessary and sufficient to realize mission; supporting objectives that are necessary and sufficient to achieve each goal; measurable actions that are necessary and sufficient to achieve each objective.
- Communication: Development of an expository description of each of the goals and objectives of the plan can help to corroborate or enhance the rigor of the plan, even before the plan is finalized. Once it has been approved, communicating the plan is an important tool for cultivating support for the organization.

#### Implementation:

- Monitoring results: While a planning process alone has its benefits, the plan itself will have value only if its plan of action is tracked and reported. A Gantt chart or a simpler table can be developed to monitor and report on the achievement of measurable results according to the established schedule. For a simple and vivid report on critical indicators, dashboards can be developed. (CI #8: The Measure of Success and CI #15: Strategic Action)

There is no one formula for planning that works for the whole spectrum of nonprofits. Thinking about strategic planning as a flexible set of tools allows us to mold the planning process to the needs and opportunities of each specific situation.

#### Other Critical Issues:

- CI 1: *Why Plan?* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci01>)
- CI 2: *The Secret Life of Surveys* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci02>)
- CI 4: *On Boards* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci04>)
- CI 5: *The Structure of Planning* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci05>)
- CI 6: *Financial Modeling* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci06>)
- CI 7: *On Mission* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci07>)
- CI 8: *The Measure of Success* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci08>)
- CI 9: *Brand Identity* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci09>)
- CI 10: *Mind Your RFPs & Qs* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci10>)
- CI 11: *Integrated Planning* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci11>)
- CI 12: *Business Planning* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci12>)
- CI 13: *Facility Planning* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci13>)
- CI 14: *Managing Change* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci14>)
- CI 15: *Strategic Action* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci15>)
- CI 16: *All About Collaboration* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci16>)
- CI 17: *Fear of Planning* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci17>)

#### Blog Posts:

Arguments Against Planning  
<http://bit.ly/SyParguments>

Listening to Stakeholders  
<http://bit.ly/SyPlisten>

Good Tension  
<http://bit.ly/SyPtension>

SWOT  
<http://bit.ly/SyPswot>

#### Planning for yourself?

We're happy to offer as much (or as little) advice or guidance as you need. Use our experience to assure your success. Contact Sam Frank to discuss the possibilities. 617 340 9991 [sbf@synthesispartnership.com](mailto:sbf@synthesispartnership.com)

